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Testimony of
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Hearing on Modern-Day Slavery: Spotlight on the 2006 Trafficking in Persons
Report, Forced Labor, and Sex Trafficking at the World Cup

House Committee on International Relations

June 14, 2006

Human Trafficking & Involuntary Servitude
Under the U.S.-Jordan Free Trade Agreement

There are an estimated 300,000 foreign guest workers employed in Jordan as domestics, in construction and agriculture, and in factories producing goods for duty-free export to the United States. Many of these guest workers are victims of human trafficking and are being held under conditions of involuntary servitude. Our research focuses on the 36,149 foreign guest workers, mostly from Bangladesh, China, Sri Lanka and India, who work in Jordan's 114 export factories, over 90 percent of which are foreign-owned.

The system operates like this. In Bangladesh, workers respond to local newspaper ads offering good jobs in Jordan, promising to pay \$134.28 a month for regular hours and up to \$250 a month with overtime. Workers will have Fridays and national holidays off, they are told. Medical care, food and housing will be entirely free. The workers are told they will live well, "like they do in the West." The only catch is that the prospective guest workers will have to pay the Bangladeshi recruitment agency typically 180,000 Taka, or \$2,657, to purchase a three-year contract to work in Jordan. As poor workers, they have no choice but to borrow the money on the informal market, at exorbitant interest rates of five to ten percent a month. Some families sell land or cattle to send a daughter or son to Jordan. The contract also ties the guest worker to just one factory, prohibiting them from working anywhere else.

Over 100 Bangladeshi workers responded to an ad to work at the **Al Shahaed** garment factory in Irbid. Upon their arrival at the airport, management immediately confiscated their passports. Nor were the workers provided with residency permits, without which they could not go out on the street without fear of being detained by the police for lack of the proper papers.

Once in the Al Shahaed factory, the workers found themselves forced to work shifts of 15, 38, 48 and even 72 hours straight, often going two or three days without sleep. They worked seven days a week. Workers who fell asleep at their sewing machines would be slapped and punched. Instead of being paid the \$250 a month that the ad promised, the workers earned two cents an hour, or \$2.31 for a 98-hour workweek. Workers who asked for their legal wages could be imprisoned up to three days without food. Workers who criticized the food the company provided were beaten with sticks and belts. Twenty-eight workers had to share one small 12-by-12-foot dorm room, which had access to running water only every third day. These workers sewed clothing for Wal-Mart.

When, in desperation, the workers demanded their legal wages, they were forcibly deported and returned to Bangladesh without their back wages. Many of these workers are now hiding in Dhaka City and peddling bicycle rickshaws to survive. They cannot return to their home villages because they have no possible way to pay off the mounting debt they incurred to go to Jordan in the first place.

At the **Western** factory, also in Irbid and producing clothing for Wal-Mart, Bangladeshi guest workers who were trafficked to Jordan faced much the same fate. They too were stripped of their passports and forced to work 16 to 20 hours a day, seven days a week. Despite working 109 hours a week, the workers routinely went for months without being paid. In the first four months of 2006, the Western workers were not paid a single cent in wages. There are also credible reports of sexual abuse, including the rape of a sixteen year-old girl. Workers who asked for their wages would be beaten and threatened with forcible deportation.

For the “crime” of meeting with a visiting U.S. delegation in May 2006, two workers from the **Saidan** factory in Sahab were beaten, forcibly deported at gunpoint and returned to Bangladesh without their back wages or even their meager belongings. Now they and their families are sinking into greater misery and debt. Despite being forced to work 56 overtime hours a week, the workers at the the Saidan are paid no overtime. Workers who dare complain are told that they too will be deported, just like the two others. The workers say the atmosphere in the factory is extremely tense, and they are afraid they will be attacked and beaten.

Just this last Sunday, June 11, twenty-five workers from the **Al Nahat** garment factory in Sahab went to the local labor court to ask for help in winning the back wages they are owed. Forced to work 15 ½ hours a day, from 7:30 a.m. to 11:00 p.m., seven days a week, the workers are routinely cheated of over 60 percent of the wages legal due them. Al Nahat’s owner responded by holding a pistol to many of the workers’ heads, telling them that if they return to the labor court, they will be shot or forcibly deported with nothing. Here too, the workers are afraid that violence could break out at any moment.

The images described, of workers from Bangladesh being trafficked to Jordan where they are held under conditions of indentured servitude, exploited and abused, are of course bad news.

The good news is that the Government of Jordan has responded quickly and seriously, and if their stated intentions turn into reality, they will be on the road to ending human trafficking and restoring the rule of law in Jordan’s export factories.

The National Labor Committee and the United Steelworkers Union have asked the Government of Jordan to demand that all factory owners immediately return the workers’ passports. The practice of tying guest workers to a single factory is also a form of modern-day slavery which must end. Workers need the right of portability, so they are free to leave abusive plants to work

in Jordan's better factories. Special attention must be paid to the 55 subcontract plants in Jordan, which largely operate beneath the radar screen and where the worst abuses occur. In the worst cases, these factories should be closed, the owners prosecuted and the workers safely relocated to better factories. A message must be sent loud and clear—that in Jordan, human trafficking will never again be tolerated. Guest workers must also be guaranteed the rights to freedom of association, to organize unions and to bargain collectively, which are among the International Labor Organization's core worker rights standards.

The positive steps that the Jordanian Government is about to implement should go beyond the factory workers and also include the foreign guest workers employed, and often abused, working as domestics, in construction and in agriculture.

Jordan is now at a crossroads, and hopefully will emerge as a model of fair labor standards, the rule of law and respect for human, women's and workers' rights. Under the U.S.-Jordan Free Trade Agreement, we must demand nothing less.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for inviting me to testify at this important hearing on human trafficking.

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Curriculum Vitae

Charles Kernaghan National Labor Committee

Charles Kernaghan is director of the National Labor Committee (NLC), an independent, nonprofit human rights organization dedicated to the protection and promotion of worker rights in the global economy—especially the rights of the young women across the developing world who assemble our clothing, CD players, sporting goods and auto parts. Kernaghan and the National Labor Committee believe that worker rights are inalienable human rights.

Kernaghan and the NLC are widely considered to be the founders of the modern anti-sweatshop movement in the U.S., having played the leading role in bringing the issue of sweatshop abuses and child labor before the American people and placing it on the national agenda. The NLC was able to do this through high profile campaigns, including exposing Kathie Lee Gifford and Wal-Mart's use of child labor in Honduras, and the fact that young women sewing \$40 t-shirts for Sean "P Diddy" Combs were forced to undergo pregnancy tests, while being paid just 15 cents for each shirt they sewed. The NLC has taken on Major League Baseball, the NFL, NBA, Disney and helped close down Burmese sweatshops controlled by the military dictators.

Kernaghan may have interviewed more sweatshop workers than anyone else alive, as he and the NLC have traveled to China, Bangladesh, Jordan, American Samoa, Costa Rica, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras to support workers rights struggles.

It was the NLC that exposed the abuse of young Vietnamese guest workers at the Daewoosa plant in American Samoa, which led to the largest FBI investigation and Justice Department prosecution of human trafficking ever. Today, the Daewoosa factory is closed, the owner is in prison and 76 of the Vietnamese workers are in safe haven in the United States.

Kernaghan and the NLC's work has been featured on CBS 60 Minutes, NBC Dateline, the New York Times, National Public Radio and many other media outlets.

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